



Fishcount Marks Dedication of New Reserve

Cheva Heck, FKNMS Public Affairs Officer

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent Billy Causey dedicated the nation's largest permanent marine reserve on July 1, 2001, launching a new area of protection for the lush coral reefs of the remote Tortugas. Located more than eighty miles west of Key West, the new reserve encompasses more than 150 square nautical miles of spectacular deepwater corals and critical fish spawning sites.

"By extending the highest level of protection to the productive waters of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve, we are helping to ensure the health of the entire region," said Superintendent Causey. "The reefs of the Tortugas are stunning and filled with life, yet they clearly show the signs of human impact. Our hope is to return to the waters of the reserve in the coming years to document increasing numbers of fish on thriving coral reefs."

After a ceremonial ribbon-cutting at the stern of the Sanctuary Research Vessel *Irene C*, a team of divers plunged into the waters of the new reserve to conduct a fish count, which will assist in tracking changes in fish populations.

The count also marked the kick-off for the Great American Fish Count, a campaign during the month of July by Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) to encourage volunteer divers and snorkelers to conduct fish surveys that provide marine resource managers with valuable data on fish populations, particularly in national marine sanctuaries.

"Our fish count today in the Tortugas Ecological Reserve will help the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary track changes in the fish life on these beautiful reefs as the new protections take effect," said Laddie Akins, executive director of REEF, a nonprofit organization based in Key Largo, Florida.

The new reserve consists of two sections: Tortugas North and Tortugas South. Tortugas North protects the luxuriant coral gardens of Sherwood Forest and the stunning pinnacles of Tortugas Bank. Tortugas South protects Riley's Hump, a low profile reef that is a spawning site for grouper and snapper. Because Riley's Hump is upstream from the Florida Keys reef tract, protecting these spawning sites may sustain fish and marine life stocks in the Keys and further



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Sanctuary team member Ben Richards admires a strangely-shaped coral formation in the new Tortugas Ecological Reserve.

north. Tortugas South also includes valuable deep-water habitat found nowhere else in the Sanctuary that supports commercially important golden crab, tilefish and snowy grouper.

The region boasts the highest water quality and the healthiest coral communities in the Sanctuary, but even these remote reefs faced the threats of overfishing, damage from fishing gear and destruction by boat anchors. The ecological reserve now fully protects all marine life, including fish, coral and invertebrates, such as shrimp and lobster. Tortugas North remains open to diving, and the Sanctuary has installed mooring buoys to protect the fragile coral reefs from anchor damage. Tortugas South is open only to vessels in transit, and to researchers and educators holding a Sanctuary permit. Sanctuary boundaries now encompass Sherwood Forest and Riley's Hump, permitting the Sanctuary to

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